

Connecting for Successful Transition: Postgraduate Distance Library and Information Studies Students' Transition Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Transition in an educational context refers to the shift from one educational environment to another and involves students adapting to a new learning context. The literature on transition is plentiful but mostly focused on transitioning to school, between primary and secondary school or from school to university. While there is a common perception that the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study requires only minor adjustments for students, evidence suggests that postgraduate students often experience transition difficulties, exacerbated when learning is undertaken at a distance and opportunities for face-to-face interpersonal interactions to address misgivings and ease transition are limited. Drawing on selected results of a study investigating Library and Information Studies (LIS) student experiences as they transition into postgraduate distance learning, this paper explores factors that facilitate and challenge postgraduate distance (PGD) students' successful transition.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

online learning; education programs/schools; students; administration

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

online learning; distance learning; postgraduate students; LIS students; transition; orientation

INTRODUCTION

Although the literature on transition to university study is plentiful, the vast majority of work on the topic focuses on school-leavers transitioning to conventional, on-campus, face-to-face undergraduate learning. Evidence suggests that postgraduate students experience transition differently from undergraduates and that while transitioning to postgraduate study is similar to other transition stages in some ways, it also has significant differences (Symons, 2011; Cluett

and Skene, 2006). These differences are amplified when learning is undertaken at a distance and opportunities for face-to-face interpersonal interactions to address misgivings and ease transition are limited (Jones, 2015). Drawing on selected results of a study investigating Library and Information Studies (LIS) student experiences as they transition into postgraduate distance learning, this paper explores factors that facilitate and challenge postgraduate distance (PGD) students' successful transition.

The research seeks to fill a gap in our knowledge and understanding about the nature of PGD students' transition experiences, particularly from the student perspective, to give us insights into their specific transition needs and to assist education providers design appropriate interventions to assist their successful transition into PGD learning. The research questions addressed are:

1. How do students experience the transition to PGD study?
2. What support is helpful for students transitioning to PGD study?
3. What challenges PGD students' successful transition?

The study focuses on postgraduate students taking taught courses at a distance, not those undertaking research degrees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Context

Evidence suggests that both postgraduate study and distance learning are areas of growth for tertiary education providers internationally. In the UK, for example, postgraduate students made up 20% of total higher education enrolments in 2019 (HESA, 2020) while in Australia, Masters by Coursework student numbers rose by 11% from 2017 to 2018 (Department of Education, Skills & Employment, 2019). The rise in popularity of distance education has been enabled by increasingly sophisticated technology and networks which enable distance modes of study to overcome geographical isolation and meet the needs of those excluded from on-campus study due to health issues or social, family-related or economic reasons (Miles, Mensinga, & Zuchowski, 2018, p.705). As a consequence, in 2016, the number of distance education students grew 5.6% to 6,359,121, representing 31.6% of all students in the U.S.A. (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

Despite these increases, challenges for students of both postgraduate and distance education have been identified in the literature. One previous investigation of students' views found that transitioning into postgraduate study is a significant process which 63% of students found difficult (West, 2012) while Duranton and Mason (2012) suggest that the quality of students' experiences with distance education varies dramatically between institutions, often dependent upon the capacity of the organisation to support appropriate technological interventions for course development and delivery. In this context, ensuring that postgraduate distance students have appropriate and timely support as they transition into their learning is essential and requires a different approach from more conventional modes of instruction.

Transition

Transition generally means changing from one form or condition to another (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Transition in an educational context has been defined and explained in a variety of different ways (Heussi, 2012; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005; Hussey & Smith, 2010) but generally refers to the shift from one educational environment to another (Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010, p.265) and involves students adapting to a new learning context; it covers aspects such as their expectations and preparation, study capability and socialization. As noted above, the literature on transition is plentiful but mostly focused on transitioning to school, between primary and secondary school or from school to university (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Tobbell, 2003; Macaro & Wingate, 2004), and, in terms of university transition, there is a strong focus on international students (Evans et al., 2018). There is perhaps a common perception that the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study requires only minor adjustment in students' attitudes and study habits (West, 2012). Because postgraduate courses are often taught in a similar way to those in undergraduate programmes, the transition to postgraduate level is frequently assumed to be more straightforward and unproblematic than other transition stages (Symons, 2011). Survey evidence indicates the reality is quite different, however. West (2012) found that 63% of postgraduate students experienced transition as significant and difficult while Cluett and Skene's (2006) survey showed that 80% of postgraduate students felt overwhelmed in their first year of study. The evidence suggests, therefore, that transition to postgraduate study is an important but often underemphasised aspect of student success at this level.

Distance learning

The definition of distance learning has evolved over time, but it generally refers to providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011). Today, distance learning is usually undertaken through an online platform. The literature discusses the many benefits that distance learning offers post-graduate students. First, flexibility is one of the mostly mentioned benefits in the literature; giving students the opportunities to access their studies anywhere underpins widening participation (Osborne, 2003; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). According to a survey of PGD students conducted by Duranton and Mason (2012), 90% of respondents indicated that the mode of delivery was an influential reason for selecting their course. For LIS postgraduate learners specifically, this flexibility is crucial, given that many are mature with caring responsibilities or in employment, and often embarking on their second career (Deeming and Chelin, 2001; Lambert and Newman, 2012). In this context, the ability to access learning at a distance is a significant advantage although the suitability of distance learning for postgraduate learning has been questioned. Holzweiss et al. (2014) highlight differences in undergraduate and postgraduate learning expectations, needs and strategies and emphasise the need to design online courses for postgraduate-level deep learning and professional development in their specific field, including measures to establish community and encourage reflection. This kind of interaction is not always easy to establish online, however, and Jones (2015) comments that the lack of interpersonal interaction between instructors and students and among students is a disadvantage of distance learning for PGD students, leading to what Duranton and Mason (2012) term "the loneliness of the long-distance learner". They suggest it is the institution's responsibility to minimise the isolation of individual learners and open up new opportunities for the learner to participate in a

learning community. A better understanding of PGD students' specific transition needs will help inform institutional approaches and initiatives, and the study reported here aimed to contribute to that understanding with a specific focus on LIS students.

METHODS

An anonymous online questionnaire was designed and distributed to gather insights and understanding of PGD learners' transition experiences (Appendix A). The sampling method was purposive: PGD students and alumni of the Information Studies programmes of Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Six key themes were identified in an analysis of relevant literature as important for PDG learners' successful transition and these formed the basis of the questionnaire: orientation; self-evaluation; expectations; information about learning support; studying online at a distance; and university learning support. Respondents were asked to respond to statements about their perceptions and experiences for each key theme on a five point Likert scale, followed by open questions allowing them to explain their responses or add more detail. The questionnaire included questions about demographics and a final section asked for respondents' overall assessments. The link to the questionnaire was distributed via an email list and the survey remained open for two weeks. Forty-five responses were returned - 21 from alumni and 24 from current students. Respondents were offered the opportunity to enter a prize draw for a voucher of their choice to encourage participation. Following data collection, the quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative response were coded thematically. Not all 45 respondents answered all questions.

RESULTS

Orientation

The programme now runs online-only orientation sessions at the beginning of the academic year but in previous years, face-to-face orientation had also been provided. Although the importance of attending orientation is emphasised, not all students attend due to work commitments, and some students begin their studies part way through the academic year so missing the beginning of year orientation sessions. Twenty-five of the forty-five respondents had attended orientation. Of these, 11 had attended online and 14 had attended in person. The results suggest that those who attended orientation had mixed experiences and opinions of its usefulness and effectiveness (Figure 1).

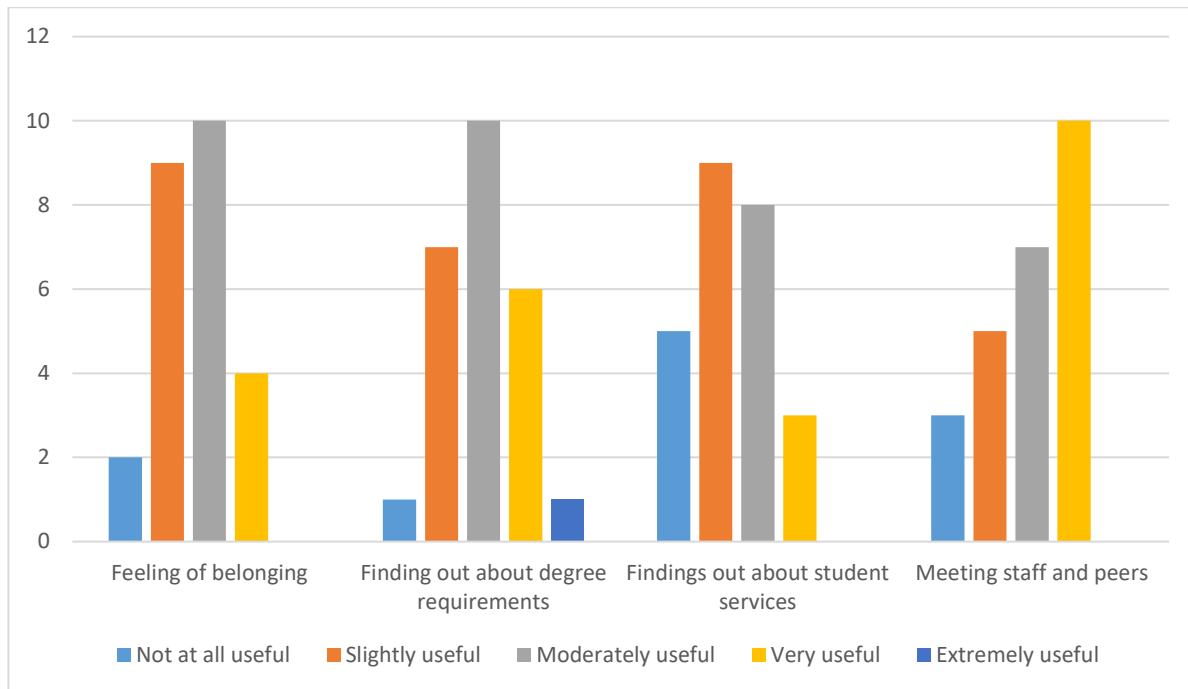


Figure 1: Students' opinions of orientation

Looking at the results in more detail, it seems that students considered orientation to be moderately useful for “finding out degree requirements” and “meeting staff and peers” but less so for encouraging a “feeling of belonging” and “finding out about student services”. This was confirmed to some extent by open text responses which emphasised the importance of orientation for gaining an impression of staff and fellow students, e.g.: *“It is helpful to have a face-to-face interaction with staff and peers rather 'seeing' each other through text chats and discussion boards.”* Other comments noted the low student participation in orientation, however, and that more emphasis on building connections with other students in the same location for mutual support and discussion would be valuable. Similarly, although the usefulness of online platforms was highlighted, students commented that it was difficult to form meaningful connections with others through these tools, desiring more personal interaction.

Students' self-evaluations of readiness for postgraduate distance learning

Students generally considered themselves reasonably well prepared to undertake PGD learning. Figure 2 indicates that they rated their “willingness and motivation to study” and their “study skills” as high, while their “time management” and “willingness to seek assistance and guidance” were rated lower.

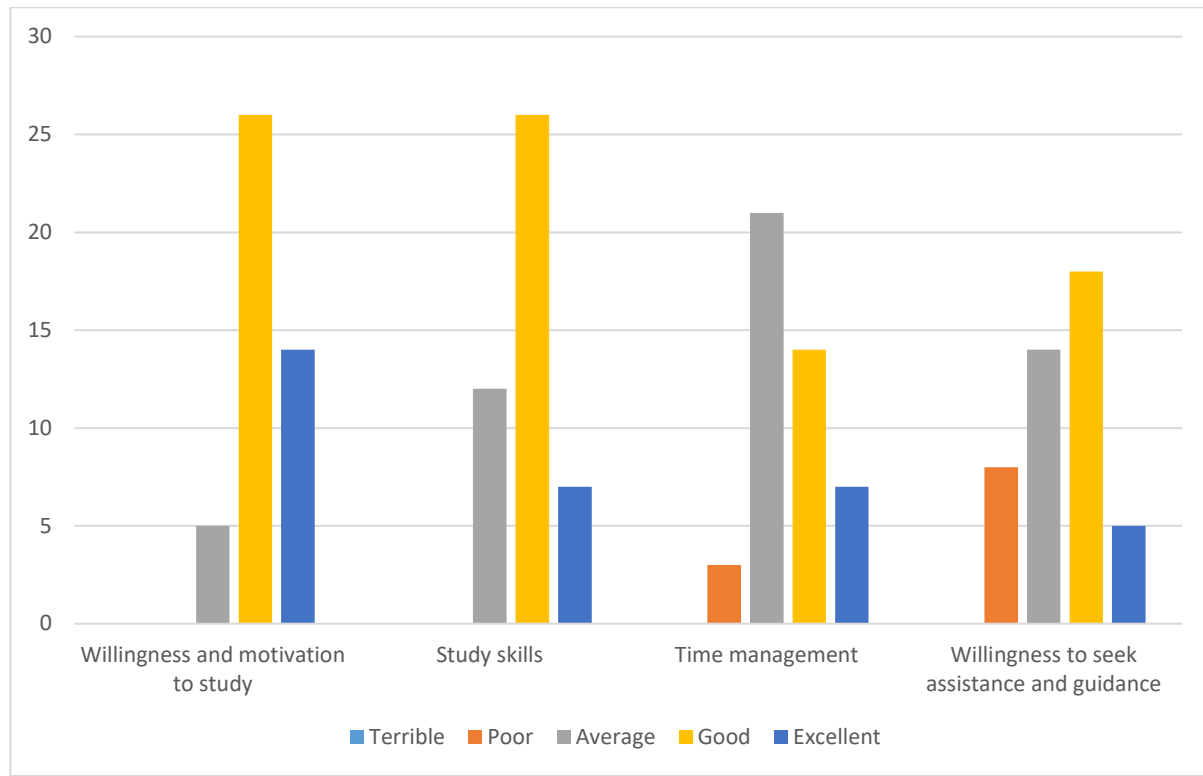


Figure 2: Students' self-evaluations of readiness for PGD learning

Comments relating to time management were common in the open-text responses. It was noted that while students' working experiences had sharpened their time management skills, scheduling time to study still represented a challenge especially when they were tired following a day at work.

Expectations

Students were asked about the extent to which the first course they had studied had matched their expectations, to gauge how successfully they had transitioned to PGD learning.

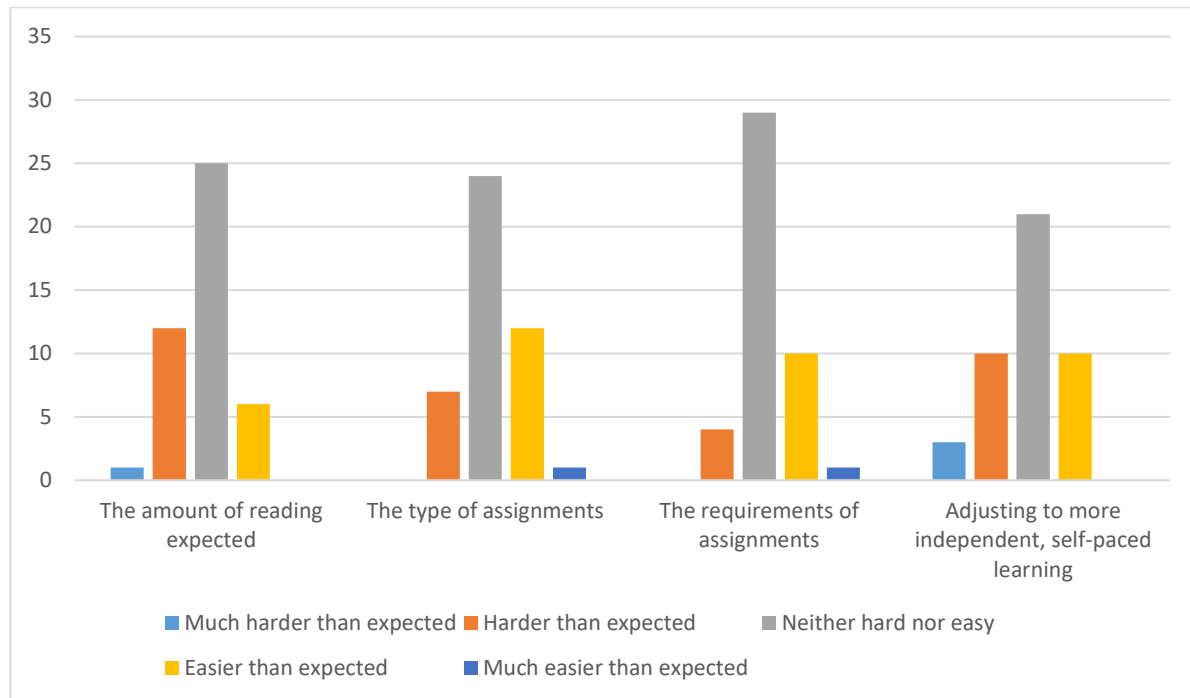


Figure 3: Students' expectations of PGD learning

Figure 3 suggests that there was some mismatch between the amount of reading required for the programme and what they had expected. This was intensified by the fact that the vast majority of respondents were in full-time jobs while studying. As one learner highlighted: *"There was a great deal of reading and I didn't always get to read everything as I was also working 40 hours."* The other notable result here is the mismatch between students' expectations of the amount of direct guidance from teaching staff they would receive and the extent to which they would be required to manage and direct their own learning. One respondent commented that it had been a: *"step up in terms of being less guided about our reading. Less explanation about what was expected in our assignments, than in undergraduate courses."* Another common theme coming through the open comments was some anxiety about returning to study after a hiatus of some years. While some found their path back to study smoother than anticipated, others struggled initially: *"It is a number of years since I did academic study and I had forgotten how time-consuming the reading is, as well as how careful one has to be when self-directed."* The results highlight the importance of managing students' expectations before they enter the programme.

Information provision

Figure 4 indicates that all sources of information relating to the respondents' learning were considered useful to some extent although there was more equivocation on those for writing assignments and where to go for additional advice.

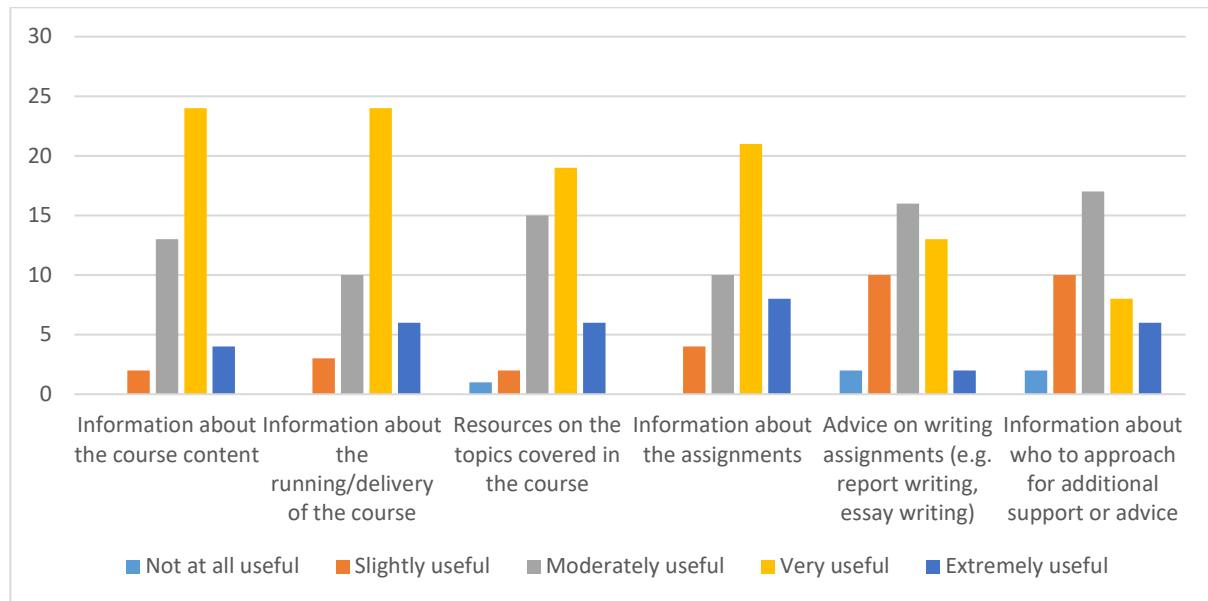


Figure 4: Students' opinions of information provision

Students seemed satisfied with the provision of information about course content, resources, delivery and assessment. The respondents indicated that most of the courses were well supported with information about readings, assignments and course content. For instance, it was noted that sample assignments and marking rubrics made it clear to learners what was required, and the VLE (virtual learning environment) Blackboard discussion boards offered opportunities for learners to receive clarification although comments noted a variability across courses and lecturers: *"This depended very much on the lecturer. Some wrote clear course and assignment guidelines, others did not. I would often ask clarifying questions which other students noted were useful."* In addition to the information supplied, course lecturers were also recognized as approachable and responsive

Online support

For an online distance programme, the quality and ease of use of the learning technologies and tools provided are of paramount importance. Figure 5 indicates that respondents generally found the platforms and online practices clear and relatively straightforward.

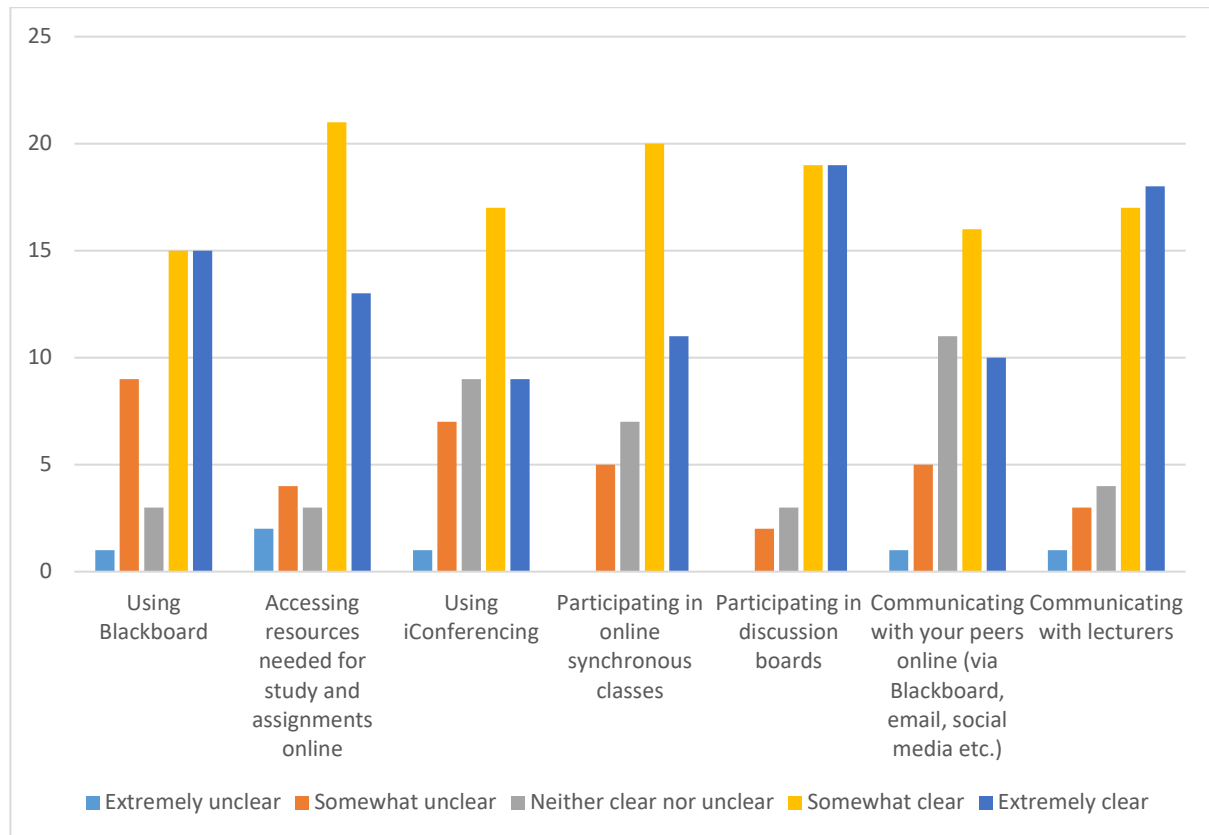


Figure 5: Students' opinions of online tools and technologies

Analysis of the open comments suggest that there were two main challenges relating to online learning technologies. First, 19 students indicated that the iConferencing platform used for synchronous online classes took time to get used to, even following attendance at a pre-course practice session. Although learners with previous experience of using iConferencing software found it “clear to use”, others struggled with technical issues and learning the software, as this respondent noted: *“I attended the [iConferencing] tutorial and read all the online information, loaded a new browser to avoid some of the problems with Safari etc. but I still found it really nerve wracking the first few weeks as it seemed to vary whether you just clicked on the link and went straight or whether you had to sign in on the second screen or click on the symbol on my task bar to open the session after clicking on the link. That is still the case, but I am more confident with [it] now.”* The second issue learners faced was with using Blackboard, often considered cumbersome and “clunky”. A common theme arising from the open comments was that the technologies took some time and practice to use effectively and hindered learners’ successful transition to some extent although they became familiar and easier with time.

Academic support

For those returning to study after a gap of some years, effective academic support is particularly crucial for successful transition. While not all learners availed themselves of the

opportunity to access all the sources of support available (Figure 6), Figure 7 indicates that most were considered supportive to one extent or another. It is notable that the support from lecturing staff was considered very helpful. In their open comments, respondents noted that it was straightforward to contact staff and that responses were timely. Again, though, this did vary to some extent by staff member/course. Some of the comments made links to issues raised in 4.3 about expectations and the need for distance students to be more proactive in managing their own learning and taking the initiative: *“I found there was plenty of support available if you were willing to use it. I had not studied for 20 years and I was apprehensive about online study in general and about the standards expected. I found there was plenty of assistance available if you asked.”*

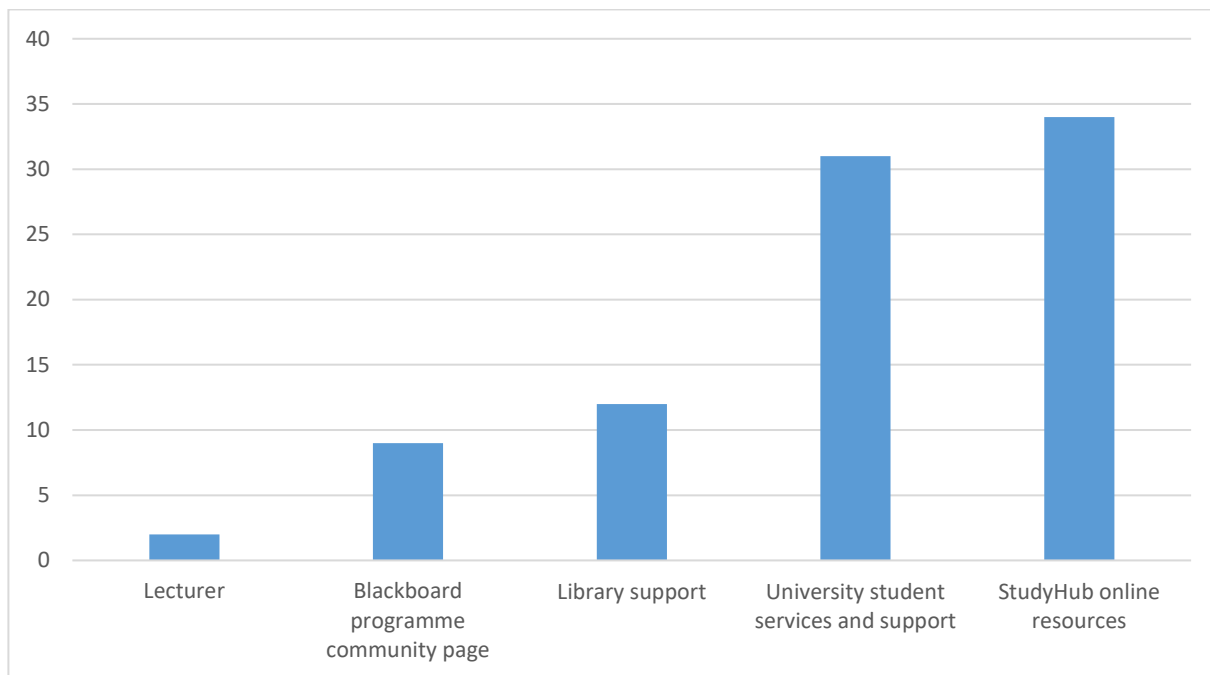


Figure 6: Sources of academic support not used

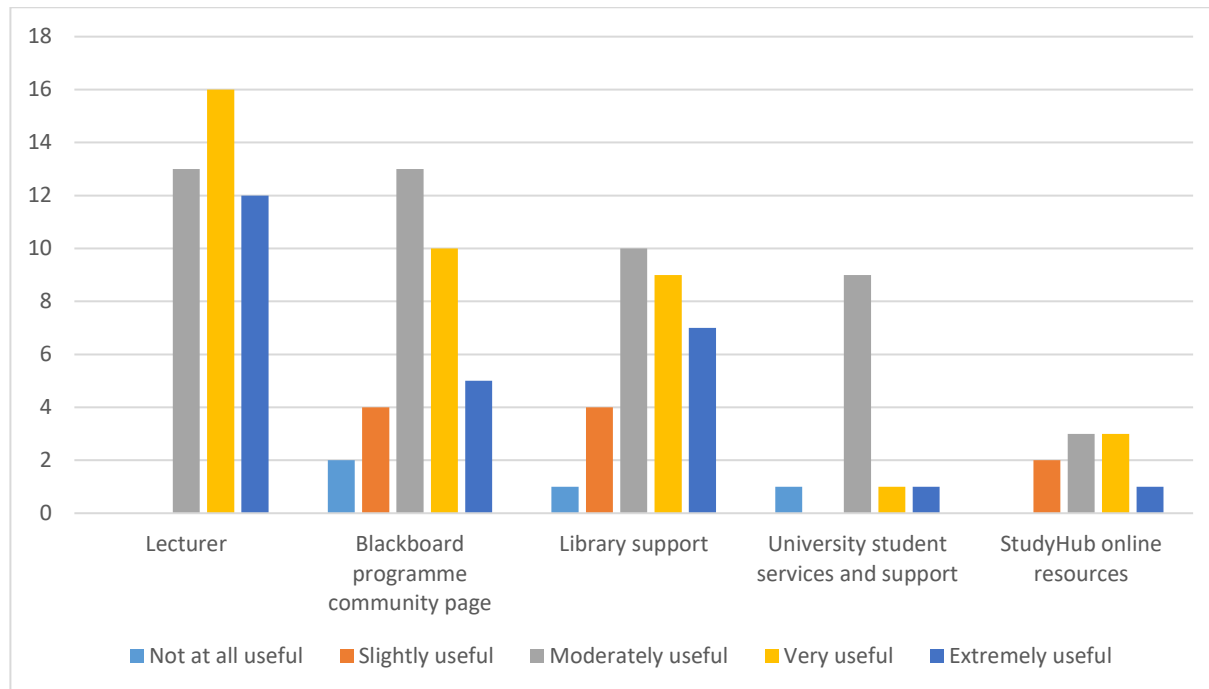


Figure 7: Students' opinions of academic support

Overall assessment

The final item on the questionnaire asked respondents to rate how successfully they had transitioned into the programme on a scale from 1 (with extreme difficulty) to 5 (very successfully). Table 1 indicates that a majority of respondents felt they had transitioned very successfully, with a mean of 4.15.

| Scale number | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|----|
| Response (n) | 1 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 22 |

Table 1: Students' overall evaluation of the success of their transition to PGD learning

Those who raised some concerns about their transition in the open comments, generally focused on two main issues that they felt had challenged their move into the programme, both of which relate to the distance mode of delivery. First, distance learning was a new experience for most and although there were pre-course preparatory sessions, it still took some time to adapt to a different form of learning. It was recognised that support such as that available from the library and technology services team was helpful in facilitating that transition. Second, students noted their experience of loneliness, especially when there were few fellow students with whom they could link up nearby. This meant that, for most students, distance learning was experienced as less enjoyable than face-to-face classes and could be a solitary experience: *"Postgraduate study is already an isolating experience - if you add in distance study, the programme needs to seriously consider how to generate an online community."*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The survey responses gave the programme team some important feedback as we develop a new online orientation module. A few issues are worth highlighting as we move forward to improve our learners' transition into the programme and their online experiences. While some technical difficulties encountered with distance learning are perhaps inevitable and can be resolved through access to good IT support, the psychological and social issues are more difficult to address. The importance of managing expectations is clear. Students need to have access to clear guidance on the requirements and demands of the programme and of distance learning before they begin their studies. Although course information includes statements about the number of hours of study each course requires, a more informed understanding of the amount and type of reading, preparation and assignments involved would lead to fewer students experiencing a "culture shock", particularly those who studied at undergraduate level some years ago. Having said that, we also want to reassure learners that some initial anxiety and feeling of being overwhelmed is not unusual and that other students have been through a similar experience, survived and thrived in their studies. The results indicating some reluctance to seek advice and guidance (Figure 2) is of note and highlight the importance of emphasising that students need to manage themselves and their studies more proactively in the distance learning context and that they should take the initiative when unsure or confused. A degree of consistency between different courses such as assignment briefs, rubrics and discussion board protocols would also address some confusions or insecurities about requirements. Finally, the need to build online connections between learners must be a priority to support the networking of students with fellow professionals and build a community of practice, defined by Wenger (2011, p.1) as "a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". Achieving this in a distance context is not easy and the programme team have tried a range of different approaches with varying degrees of success. We continue to experiment, particularly through the new online orientation module because we recognise that building a supportive cohort experience is an important contributor to students' positive experiences, while low interaction can exacerbate learners' nervousness during transition. In 2020, our core introductory course ran a group project that, while raising some logistical challenges for students learning online from different locations, also had the effect of improving group relationships and cohort affiliation. Finally, although respondents often commented that they missed face-to-face interactions with peers and lecturers, for one student there were advantages: "*It wasn't as much fun as going to classes, but I could do in my pjs.*"

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APPENDIX A

Successful Transition to Postgraduate Taught Distance Programmes – Survey of Postgraduate Taught Distance students.

Section 1: Demographics

Are you a current IST student or an alumnus?

| | |
|---------|--|
| Current | |
| Alumnus | |

If current, which programme are you currently enrolled in?

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Postgraduate certificate | |
| Postgraduate diploma | |
| Masters | |

If alumnus, which programme did you graduate from?

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Postgraduate certificate | |
| Postgraduate diploma | |
| Masters | |

What were you doing before entering IST programme?

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| University student | |
| Gap year | |
| Worked up to 2 years | |
| Worked 3-5 years | |
| Worked more than 5 years | |

What is your highest qualification?

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Bachelor's degree | |
|-------------------|--|

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Honours degree | |
| Master's degree | |
| PhD | |
| Other, please state | |

Section 2: Orientation

Did you attend orientation for the IST programme?

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Yes, online | |
| Yes, in person | |
| No, I did not attend orientation | |

If yes, how useful did you find the orientation you attended for introducing you to the IST programme in relation to the following aspects?

Scale: 1 Not at all useful – 5 Very useful

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Feeling of belonging | | | | | |
| Finding out degree requirements | | | | | |
| Finding out about student services | | | | | |
| Meeting staff and peers | | | | | |

Please explain your responses.

| |
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| |
|--|

Section 3: Self-evaluation

How would you evaluate yourself in the following areas before you took your first course on the IST programme?

Scale: 1 Very weak – 5 Very strong

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Willingness and motivation to study | | | | | |
| Study skills | | | | | |
| Time management | | | | | |
| Willingness to seek assistance and guidance | | | | | |

Section 4: Expectations

Thinking back to the first course that you studied on the IST programme, to what extent did the following meet your expectations of postgraduate learning?

Scale: 1 much harder than expected – 5 much easier than expected

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| The amount of reading expected | | | | | |
| The types of assignments | | | | | |
| The requirements of the assignments | | | | | |
| Adjusting to more independent, self-paced learning | | | | | |

Please explain your responses.

Section 5: Learning support

How did you feel about the support provided, or that you were able to access, when you started your first course on the IST programme?

Scale: 1 Not at all useful – 5 Very useful

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| Information about the course content | | | | | |
| Information about the running/delivery of the course | | | | | |
| Resources on the topics covered in the course | | | | | |
| Information about the assignments | | | | | |
| Advice on writing assignments (e.g. report writing, essay writing) | | | | | |
| Information about who to approach for additional support or advice | | | | | |

Please explain your responses.

Section 6: Studying online at a distance

We'd now like to ask you some questions about studying online at a distance. Again, thinking back to the first course that you studied on the IST programme, how straightforward did you find the following?

Scale: 1 Not at all straightforward– 5 Very straightforward

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Using Blackboard | | | | | |
| Accessing resources needed for study and assignments online | | | | | |
| Using Saba/iConferencing | | | | | |
| Participating in online synchronous classes | | | | | |
| Participating in discussion boards | | | | | |
| Communicating with your peers online (via Blackboard, email, social media etc.) | | | | | |
| Communicating with lecturers | | | | | |

Please explain your responses.

Section 7: University learning support

How helpful did you find the following sources of academic support when beginning your studies?

Scale: 1 Not at all helpful — 5 very helpful [N/A: did not use]

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | N/A |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|-----|
| Lecturer | | | | | | |
| Blackboard Information Studies Community | | | | | | |
| Library support | | | | | | |
| University student services and support | | | | | | |
| StudyHub online resources | | | | | | |
| Others, please note | | | | | | |
| Add more "Others" | | | | | | |

Section 8: Overall assessment

Overall, what is your assessment of how successfully you moved into the IST programme?

1 With extreme difficulty – 5 Very successfully

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Please add any comments, opinions on your initial experiences of the IST programme, including what you think would have helped your transition into either postgraduate study and/or online distance learning.

| |
|--|
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|--|